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Statement submitted by International Federation of University Women, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is being issued without formal editing.

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Statement

We express serious concern at the slow and uneven progress that has been made in addressing and tackling illiteracy globally. In sub-Saharan Africa for example, the rate of illiteracy amongst adults has fallen by a nominal 3% in the last 15 years. It is unacceptable that in the 21st century there are still 781 million people in the world who cannot read or write, of whom two thirds are women and girls. Illiteracy is not just a generational issue; there are 123 million 15-24 year old youths today — amongst them 76 million girls — who cannot pick up a book and comprehend the content and knowledge therein. Political commitments to date have not yielded the desired results. Goal four of the Dakar Framework for Action, which calls for a 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, has not been met, nor is it likely that goal two of the Millennium Development Goals for universal primary education will be achieved.

A dominant cause of illiteracy is poverty, the effects of which are exacerbated in women and girls, heightening their risk of personal and economic exploitation. Other important factor that influences the significant gender gap in literacy levels include socio-economic norms which see girls and women relegated to the domestic sphere as care-givers and home-makers. Where families are not ideologically opposed to educating their daughters, financial constraints nonetheless often mean that there are only enough resources to send the sons to school. Marginalisation is a major barrier in literacy equity and equality. At-risk groups — particularly disabled, rural, indigenous, migrant and displaced women and girls — face multiple discrimination in accessing learning. For example, literacy levels amongst women with disabilities are estimated to be as low as one per cent.

We believe that literacy is a fundamental life skill and the cornerstone of personal autonomy, social inclusion and economic empowerment. Literacy should be promoted and imparted universally to all people. Educated and literate girls and women are an integral part of sustainable development. Long-term vision, political courage, legislation, and commitment of sufficient economic resources are needed to ensure access to quality, lifelong education for girls and boys, men and women, alike. We strongly urge policy makers to incorporate and implement local, national and international literacy campaigns in the post-2015 development agenda. We recommend the adoption of specific, relevant and measurable targets, including the compilation, publication and dissemination of gender- and age-disaggregated data that evaluate literacy levels of all populations along a continuum. Cognisant of modern-day technological advancements and necessities, states should adopt definitions of literacy that also include financial and digital literacy, as well as functional competencies of reading, writing and numeracy.